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ABSTRACT

This bibliography offers detailed summaries of five articles (published between 1983 and 1993) that provide practical and theoretical advice on designing writing assignments that can serve as more than just evaluation tools. The articles summarized in the bibliography confirm common sense but also dispel some common misconceptions about student writing and the effectiveness of writing assignments. The first article in the bibliography describes the cognitive development of college students and lays the groundwork for some of the assertions in the next four articles. The second article addresses the goals of good writing assignments and pinpoints strategies which ensure that students do not misread those goals. The third and fourth articles give strategies for constructing a good assignment and suggest types of assignments that foster critical thinking, while the fifth article concentrates on the idea of sequencing assignments and gives an example of a sequence based on a central theme. (NKA)

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A Brief Annotated Bibliography: Designing Writing Assignments that Foster Critical Thinking

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"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
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This bibliography summarizes five articles that offer practical and theoretical advice on designing writing assignments that will serve as more than just evaluation tools. Much of the research confirms common sense, but it also dispels some common misconceptions about student writing and the effectiveness of writing assignments. The first piece describes the cognitive development of college students and lays the groundwork for some of the assertions in the following articles. The second article addresses the goals of good writing assignments and strategies to ensure that students don't misread those goals. The third and fourth articles give strategies for constructing a good assignment and suggest types of assignments that foster critical thinking. The fifth one concentrates on the idea of sequencing assignments and gives an example of a sequence based on a central theme.

Gainen, Joanne. "Cognitive Development." Presented at The Seventeenth National Institute on Issues in Teaching and Learning: *Teaching Critical Thinking and Writing.* The University of Chicago, June 13–16, 1990.

College students develop intellectually in fairly predictable ways as they confront new ideas and beliefs different from their own. As they progress through various stages of cognitive development, their attitudes toward knowledge and their strategies as writers change. Gainen's scheme for these stages, presented below as four "perspectives," is based on two studies of the cognitive development of college students (Perry, William G., Jr. *Forms of Intellectual Development in the College Years: A Scheme,* New York: Holt Rinehart, 1970, and Belenky, Mary F. et al. *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind,* New York: Basic Books, 1986). An understanding of these attitudes and strategies is crucial to an understanding of why student writers write the way they do and how writing assignments might be best designed.

Perspective I: Dualism. Characteristic of high school students and many first-year college students.

1. As knowers, students exhibit polarized, right-wrong thinking. They mistake their personal views for "truth," believe knowledge is factual information, expect to learn by absorbing "truth" from authorities (teachers, textbooks) and by accumulating facts, lack tolerance for ambiguity and qualified language, and lack standards for judging what is important. They tend to read for facts instead of meaning. These attitudes can lead to such questions as "Will this be on the exam?" "How many pages of reading are required for this paper?" and "What does the teacher want?"

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2. As writers, dualists may offer facts without interpretation, give simplistic solutions, or leave ideas undeveloped, with little regard for alternative interpretations. They may use dogmatic, moralistic, or categorical rhetoric, citing and praising those who agree with them and ignoring or blaming those who don't. They are likely to write by some rigid formula, perhaps organizing a paper by lumping all related facts together with no clear focus. They may believe that they should be graded on effort and on the quantity and accuracy of information.

Perspective II: Multiplicity. Most common perspective of college students, even many seniors.

1. As knowers, these students believe that although all answers aren't known, they will be known eventually. Where answers aren't known, different views are mere "opinions" that are equally good or bad. In other words, students see no way to distinguish between opinions and supported positions. Some may assert themselves ("I have a right to my opinion") while others may diminish themselves ("It's just my opinion"), but both groups tend to perceive truth and values as arbitrary.
2. As writers, these students may be able to present or acknowledge different positions but be unable to address disagreements or implications, to distinguish between an opinion and a supported position, or to effectively persuade because of an inability to understand an audience's needs. They fail to take the views of others into account or rush to contradict opposing views without serious analysis. They may attribute a low grade to arbitrary factors (instructor bias, disagreement, or difference in "style") since they don't recognize that the lack of justification for their ideas subtracts from the effectiveness of their writing.

Perspective III: Relativism. Characteristic of accomplished seniors.

1. As knowers, these students realize that many views exist, but that some are more valid and can be justified more convincingly. They can develop criteria (quality of reasoning, credibility of evidence, and internal consistency) for judging ideas. They recognize that people have reasons for their differences that are grounded in different assumptions, contexts, knowledge, emphasis, and weighting of evidence. They are beginning to understand that knowledge structures are provisional, and that while authorities don't have the ultimate truth, they do have experience and have thought deeply about the topic. They may also begin to see that different disciplines have different procedures for analyzing, categorizing, and synthesizing information.
2. As writers, these students can recognize the needs of an audience and write for it effectively. They can anticipate objections to their arguments, represent opposing views sympathetically, and critically examine their own conclusions. Their tone is reasonable and rational, and they use qualified language to indicate degrees of conviction.

Perspective IV: Commitment in Relativism. Probably rarely achieved by students (or anyone) in all facets of life.

1. As knowers, such students recognize that knowledge is inherently indeterminate, value-laden, and constructed by fallible humans who are trying hard to be objective and rational. They perceive that experts search for understanding and try to make reasonable judgments along the way. Such people are willing to make choices and commitments based on analysis, judgment, and acknowledged values.
2. As writers, such students can identify and evaluate assumptions, values, and ethical perspectives underlying a position or dispute. They can present issues and topics in complex terms and forms, they can reason dialectically, and they can understand writing as a process that both generates and displays understanding and knowledge.

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Gainen's scheme has clear implications for designing writing assignments:

1. Perspective I writing tasks might include summarizing, outlining, or listing; Perspective II tasks can introduce the pluralism of ideas and use disagreements between authorities to force students to acknowledge and deal with different views; Perspective III tasks should include argument—the supporting of claims by reasoning and evidence—and students should make use of the discipline's analytical processes, tools, and criteria; Perspective IV tasks should require students to look at the underlying values that serve as a basis for choosing among alternative arguments.
2. Because any class will have students with a mixture of cognitive skills, any writing assignment should contain subtasks that can be done by Perspective I students in addition to tasks that push them toward higher perspectives.
3. Any sequence of writing assignments or any assignment that is broken down into steps affords an opportunity to improve the students' cognitive skills by sequencing tasks from simple to complex and by allowing an instructor to give students feedback so that they can refine their skills.
4. A writing assignment that includes some form of collaboration among students (collaborative planning, peer-group response to drafts, collaborative writing) helps them move out of Perspective I by forcing them to acknowledge different points of view and to rely less on authorities. Collaboration allows less advanced students to observe and learn from those with better developed cognitive skills, and it allows able students to refine their skills for a real audience.

Reiff, John, and James Middleton. "A Model for Designing and Revising Assignments." ***fforum: Essays on Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Writing.*** **Ed. Patricia Stock. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1983. 263–268.**

Writing assignments often present students with a set of complex demands, decision-making opportunities, and unspecified assumptions. By making their expectations clearer, instructors give students a greater chance to succeed and learn from assignments.

Reiff and Middleton see three possible goals for writing assignments:

1. Discovery. "Students are asked to write in order to clarify their ideas or feelings, uncover new information, integrate new material, understand a process or relationship, or in some other way generate new learning" (264).
2. Communication. Students need a real or hypothetical rhetorical stance where they have an audience to write for, a purpose that is grounded in a specific situation, and a persona or role in which they act as a writer. If they are not given an explicit communication goal, students tend to write as novices to experts—a wholly artificial rhetorical stance found only in college.
3. Performance. This goal is the one that looms largest for students and the one they are likely to assume prevails above others. Unfortunately, students tend to define this goal for themselves in superficial ways, "attempting simply to show that they did the readings, or to show control over surface errors while producing a shallow empty text" (264).

Reiff and Middleton suggest that instructors set up writing tasks that include some private and unevaluated writing, that allow students to generate information that might even be new to the instructor, and that give students real or realistic audiences to write for; this writing should be evaluated in terms of the students' discovery and communication.

Instructors should, and usually do, communicate what the end product ought to look like in terms of the subject, tasks to accomplish (e.g., analyze, compare and contrast, apply), length, and format. However, assignments should also specify steps in the process towards that product, such as "conferences, preliminary thesis statements, group discussions, or required revisions" (265) on first drafts. Such steps force students to reflect on the topic and to abandon single-draft, last-minute efforts that only try to fulfill the performance goal.

Even if an instructor doesn't make all of these goals and elements of writing assignments explicit, students must address them, either consciously or unconsciously, sometimes with results that the instructor finds surprising and puzzling. In designing a sequence of assignments, the instructor can begin by tightly structuring initial assignments so that students can see all the required elements and the freedoms and constraints they impose. Later assignments can then allow students to make choices, perhaps about audience or criteria or subject matter.

Moss, Andrew, and Carol Holder. "Assigning Writing." ***Improving Student Writing: A Guidebook for Faculty in All Disciplines.*** **Pomona, CA: California Polytechnic, 1988. 1–9.**

Moss and Holder preface their suggestions by emphasizing that writing assignments not only help foster learning, but also prepare students for their careers by teaching thinking and writing skills that they will need throughout their professional lives.

They suggest three practical strategies for designing effective writing assignments:

1. "Tying the assignment to your course objectives" (2). The instructor can make a list of what her objectives are for the course and what the students are expected to learn. Each assignment should be designed to accomplish one or more of those goals.
2. "Specifying the writing task, the audience, and the evaluative criteria for your assignments" (2).
   a. An open-ended writing assignment may be welcomed by a few students as an opportunity, but the majority of students will flounder, creating "diffuse, disorganized papers that would be burdens to read as well as to write" (2) and that show little thought. Breaking the assignment down into several discrete steps can help students to focus and organize better.
   b. By specifying an audience, the student can get away from the instructor-as-reader-and-evaluator syndrome that often makes students who are lively and engaging in class turn dull and stilted in writing. An audience of peers will help students explain their ideas "with the clarity and completeness non-experts require" (3); peer review can be built into the steps of the assignment to help test the assumptions they've made. A fictional audience can be created to motivate students to think in real-world terms and to reinforce the need to communicate clearly.
   c. An assignment should let the students know how the product will be evaluated. Explicit criteria can put students at ease and help them direct their energies. They also help students evaluate their own progress.
3. "Giving students a chance to help one another" (3). Because teamwork is an integral part of many professions, some collaborative processes can be usefully built into the steps of an assignment. Students can practice analyzing questions and developing ideas, and they can review rough drafts. Less skilled students benefit from interacting with better students and from reading good drafts; the more able students benefit from explaining course materials and concepts to others.

Moss and Holder caution that any writing assignment that has not been attempted with students before can have unforeseen problems, but they advise against discarding the whole concept if the results don't work out as hoped. Some fine-tuning may be necessary: the directions may have been too vague, the evaluation criteria still unclear, or the students asked to do too much in too short a time. Sequencing of writing assignments from short and simple to longer and more complex helps students work into the course material more gradually at the same time as they are trying new writing tasks.

The authors offer a checklist of seventeen suggestions for writing assignments. Besides the suggestions discussed above, these include the following:

1. Assign writing that doesn't just test students' knowledge but helps them learn.
2. Get a colleague to read the assignment handout for clarity.
3. Keep notes on successes and pitfalls of assignments to help in modifying them.
4. Discuss the assignment thoroughly in class.
5. Let students see models of good writing of the kind you expect.
6. Talk to other faculty about successes and failures with writing assignments.

They also offer some questions for evaluating the design of an assignment:

1. What is the purpose of the assignment?
2. Is the task clearly and succinctly described?
3. What verbal or conceptual abilities does the assignment ask the student to use or develop?
4. Will the students have a clear idea of how their performance will be evaluated?
5. How does the assignment relate to preceding and ensuing course assignments in terms of developing students' skills sequentially?
6. Can the assignment be revised to reflect more fully the course's aims in promoting the mastery of particular knowledge or the development of specific skills?

Myers, Chet. "Designing Effective Written Assignments." ***Teaching Students to Think Critically: A Guide for Faculty in All Disciplines.*** **San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988. 69–89.**

Traditional term papers yield unimpressive results from the majority of students. Students summarize too much, fail to critique or analyze, and tend to focus on format out of fear and confusion about content. Myers argues that critical thinking abilities can't be learned through ingestion of facts from research and incubation of those facts before writing. Rather, critical thinking skills must be practiced regularly.

Assignments that foster critical thinking have some basic characteristics:

1. They include a step-wise, orderly sequence that develops skills.
2. The skills start at a low level and move toward increasing complexity, e.g., summarizing, recognizing basic issues, identifying key concepts, recognizing assumptions, asking appropriate questions, creating arguments, critiquing arguments.
3. The sequencing leads to more and shorter assignments, some of which can be done during class time.
4. The assignments focus on real problems and issues, starting with the concrete and personal and moving to the more detached and abstract. For example, instead of asking students to "distinguish the relationship between Jean-Paul Sartre's concepts of anguish and freedom" (73), ask them instead to apply Sartre's concepts to the situation of a friend who is in deep despair over a failed relationship.
5. The assignments are given with clear and unambiguous instructions—over-explicitness is better than the risk of misinterpretation.

Myers suggests five types of written assignments that can be worked into this sequence:

1. Brief summaries that ask for more than just condensing and paraphrasing and that require identifying, processing, and ranking important concepts and issues. Students could be asked to summarize an assigned reading, a lecture or classroom presentation, a discussion, or a videotape.
2. Short analytical papers where the later ones build on the skills developed in earlier ones.
3. Problem-solving exercises using popular media (e.g., newspaper reports, editorials, advertisements). Students can be asked to apply principles being discussed in the course to these materials. For example, if the class is studying free market competition, an article that addresses "the farm problem" could be summarized, its author's interpretation compared with the model being discussed in class, and its conclusions critiqued.
4. Structured projects that involve observation or interviews, require a minimum of props or expertise, and can be completed in a short time.
5. Simulations of realistic problems in the discipline that help the student assume a role, target an audience, and adopt a specific purpose.

Myers recognizes the problems with workload that more assignments create, but he points out that the pile of papers on each due date is smaller because individual assignments are shorter. The sequencing of assignments will do a much better job of building skills than the traditional term paper, and students can learn from the immediate feedback that follows each of their efforts.

Pytlik, Betty P. "Sequencing Writing Assignments to Foster Critical Thinking." ***The Critical Writing Workshop: Designing Assignments to Foster Critical Thinking.*** **Ed. Toni-Lee Capossela. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1993. 71–93.**

Often, writing assignments are designed as if they exist in a vacuum. However, Pytlik advocates the sequencing of writing assignments around a theme so that students can benefit from writing about a series of related subjects.

The sequencing of assignments has several goals:

1. To "move students beyond personal knowledge and personal responses to shared values and traditions" (74).
2. To develop cognitive skills and critical thinking skills.
3. To integrate reading and writing.
4. To "help students see writing as a means of knowing and a means of coming to know" (74).
5. To "prepare students for writing in their professions and for academic writing" (75).

Writing assignments can incorporate any or all of the following kinds of sequencing:

1. The assignments can move linearly, from easiest to hardest, in both cognitive and rhetorical terms.
2. Each assignment in the sequence can have a subset of tasks that help the students through that assignment.
3. The sequence can be recursive so that each assignment demands that students either use and expand *strategies* already practiced in a previous assignment or reevaluate *content* generated in a previous assignment, or both.

Pytlik then gives an example of a sequenced writing assignment based on the theme of the family, specifically asking "What is a family?" and "How is family a political issue?" (77). The assignments move through the following sequence:

1. A personal essay answering the first question.
2. A personal account of a family-related event.
3. A ghost-written account of the previous assignment of another student in the class. This assignment calls for some distancing from the subject and some interviewing of the student who wrote the original version.
4. A summary of a periodical article on some aspect of family.
5. An essay based on a thesis about a family relationship in one of the readings for the class.
6. An exploratory essay (one that "does not come to a conclusion and is not, therefore, thesis-driven" (80)) on what it means when a political program (left or right) claims to be pro-family. The essay should begin with an illustrative anecdote and its implications and then follow the question wherever it leads.
7. A proposal that defines a problem, identifies its causes, identifies an audience capable of acting on the problem, and proposes and discusses a solution.
8. A final in-class paper that asks the first question over again.

Although this chapter is written primarily for composition teachers, the sequence model can be used in whole or in part and can be adapted to a variety of themes and courses. Pytlik offers a heuristic to help in designing such a sequence:

1. What is a topic about which your students share knowledge and on which they are able to find information from a variety of sources?
2. What skills do you want them to practice during the quarter? Summarizing? Synthesizing? Developing theses? Analyzing? Persuading?
3. What information-gathering techniques should they practice? Interviewing? Library search?
4. What basic question do you want them to answer as the driving force behind all the assignments, yielding, on the last assignment, a rhetorically and cognitively complex paper?
5. How should the assignments be arranged? According to difficulty of assessing the audience? According to the complexity of cognitive skills required?
6. What in-class and out-of-class activities will be required to connect and complete the sequence?

This project was funded by The Campus Writing Center, University of California, Davis, CA 95616

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5. How does the assignment relate to preceding and ensuing course assignments in terms of developing students' skills sequentially?
6. Can the assignment be revised to reflect more fully the course's aims in promoting the mastery of particular knowledge or the development of specific skills?

Myers, Chet. "Designing Effective Written Assignments." ***Teaching Students to Think Critically: A Guide for Faculty in All Disciplines.*** **San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988. 69–89.**

Traditional term papers yield unimpressive results from the majority of students. Students summarize too much, fail to critique or analyze, and tend to focus on format out of fear and confusion about content. Myers argues that critical thinking abilities can't be learned through ingestion of facts from research and incubation of those facts before writing. Rather, critical thinking skills must be practiced regularly.

Assignments that foster critical thinking have some basic characteristics:

1. They include a step-wise, orderly sequence that develops skills.
2. The skills start at a low level and move toward increasing complexity, e.g., summarizing, recognizing basic issues, identifying key concepts, recognizing assumptions, asking appropriate questions, creating arguments, critiquing arguments.
3. The sequencing leads to more and shorter assignments, some of which can be done during class time.
4. The assignments focus on real problems and issues, starting with the concrete and personal and moving to the more detached and abstract. For example, instead of asking students to "distinguish the relationship between Jean-Paul Sartre's concepts of anguish and freedom" (73), ask them instead to apply Sartre's concepts to the situation of a friend who is in deep despair over a failed relationship.
5. The assignments are given with clear and unambiguous instructions—over-explicitness is better than the risk of misinterpretation.

Myers suggests five types of written assignments that can be worked into this sequence:

1. Brief summaries that ask for more than just condensing and paraphrasing and that require identifying, processing, and ranking important concepts and issues. Students could be asked to summarize an assigned reading, a lecture or classroom presentation, a discussion, or a videotape.
2. Short analytical papers where the later ones build on the skills developed in earlier ones.
3. Problem-solving exercises using popular media (e.g., newspaper reports, editorials, advertisements). Students can be asked to apply principles being discussed in the course to these materials. For example, if the class is studying free market competition, an article that addresses "the farm problem" could be summarized, its author's interpretation compared with the model being discussed in class, and its conclusions critiqued.
4. Structured projects that involve observation or interviews, require a minimum of props or expertise, and can be completed in a short time.
5. Simulations of realistic problems in the discipline that help the student assume a role, target an audience, and adopt a specific purpose.

Myers recognizes the problems with workload that more assignments create, but he points out that the pile of papers on each due date is smaller because individual assignments are shorter. The sequencing of assignments will do a much better job of building skills than the traditional term paper, and students can learn from the immediate feedback that follows each of their efforts.

Pytlik, Betty P. "Sequencing Writing Assignments to Foster Critical Thinking." ***The Critical Writing Workshop: Designing Assignments to Foster Critical Thinking.*** **Ed. Toni-Lee Capossela. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1993. 71–93.**

Often, writing assignments are designed as if they exist in a vacuum. However, Pytlik advocates the sequencing of writing assignments around a theme so that students can benefit from writing about a series of related subjects.

The sequencing of assignments has several goals:

1. To "move students beyond personal knowledge and personal responses to shared values and traditions" (74).
2. To develop cognitive skills and critical thinking skills.
3. To integrate reading and writing.
4. To "help students see writing as a means of knowing and a means of coming to know" (74).
5. To "prepare students for writing in their professions and for academic writing" (75).

Writing assignments can incorporate any or all of the following kinds of sequencing:

1. The assignments can move linearly, from easiest to hardest, in both cognitive and rhetorical terms.
2. Each assignment in the sequence can have a subset of tasks that help the students through that assignment.
3. The sequence can be recursive so that each assignment demands that students either use and expand *strategies* already practiced in a previous assignment or reevaluate *content* generated in a previous assignment, or both.

Pytlik then gives an example of a sequenced writing assignment based on the theme of the family, specifically asking "What is a family?" and "How is family a political issue?" (77). The assignments move through the following sequence:

1. A personal essay answering the first question.
2. A personal account of a family-related event.
3. A ghost-written account of the previous assignment of another student in the class. This assignment calls for some distancing from the subject and some interviewing of the student who wrote the original version.
4. A summary of a periodical article on some aspect of family.
5. An essay based on a thesis about a family relationship in one of the readings for the class.
6. An exploratory essay (one that "does not come to a conclusion and is not, therefore, thesis-driven" (80)) on what it means when a political program (left or right) claims to be pro-family. The essay should begin with an illustrative anecdote and its implications and then follow the question wherever it leads.
7. A proposal that defines a problem, identifies its causes, identifies an audience capable of acting on the problem, and proposes and discusses a solution.
8. A final in-class paper that asks the first question over again.

Although this chapter is written primarily for composition teachers, the sequence model can be used in whole or in part and can be adapted to a variety of themes and courses. Pytlik offers a heuristic to help in designing such a sequence:

1. What is a topic about which your students share knowledge and on which they are able to find information from a variety of sources?
2. What skills do you want them to practice during the quarter? Summarizing? Synthesizing? Developing theses? Analyzing? Persuading?
3. What information-gathering techniques should they practice? Interviewing? Library search?
4. What basic question do you want them to answer as the driving force behind all the assignments, yielding, on the last assignment, a rhetorically and cognitively complex paper?
5. How should the assignments be arranged? According to difficulty of assessing the audience? According to the complexity of cognitive skills required?
6. What in-class and out-of-class activities will be required to connect and complete the sequence?

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